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ABSTRACT

Students who are motivated to write and learn generally pay attention to written comments on their rough and final drafts; students who are not motivated generally ignore written comments and do not use them in revision, but nonetheless are concerned about grades. One effective way of increasing student interest in writing and skill development is to shift the emphasis in the classroom and on the returned papers from teacher comments on writing and learning to student comments on their own learning and writing. By asking them to examine their feelings and thoughts about themselves as writers, their own writing, and the effects of comments on their writing, students can better understand their processes of revision and the purpose of their writing, which in many cases is to further understand a work of art and, by implication, themselves. Also, in considering why they have done a writing assignment, students can better consider alternative approaches on future assignments, and come to regard writing assignments and their outcome as something within their control and for which they are responsible. (CRH)

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A Teacher/Researcher Writes about Learning

Courtney Rogers

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A Teacher/Researcher Writes About Learning

Courtney Rogers

As a public high school English teacher who is committed to the teaching of writing, I have confronted week after week, year after year, the dilemma of time -- there is never enough of it. It was with a selfish concern as well as with a genuine desire to learn about the writing process, then, that I began to investigate the effects of commenting on students' writing. If I discovered, as I suspected I would, that the comments I took hours to write were less than positive forces, I would have proved to myself something that the research and testimonials of numerous educators for years had failed to do.

It had always seemed to me that students who appeared already motivated to write and learn generally paid attention to my comments on their rough and final drafts and showed an interest in using them to revise their writing; students who were not already motivated when they came to my class did not show an interest in the comments but usually did show concern about the grade. Although it was frustrating to continue a practice which seemed pointless with these students, I could never justify to my own satisfaction treating their writing differently. So I continued to write comments about every student's drafts (after all, that was part of my job), but I began systematically to collect data on my students' views about this practice. Periodically I asked students to write down their thoughts and feelings about: themselves as writers, their own writing, and the effects of comments on their writing.

About two months into the research, I tried a couple of new strategies in my classroom which shifted my focus away from my commenting on their writing and learning onto their own. First, I began to experiment with a technique discovered by another teacher/researcher, Marian McLean ("Voices Within: The Audience Speaks," 1982) of having students write comments about

their own writing in the margins of their drafts. Second, after hearing Pat D'Arcy speak to my teacher/researcher class (November 17, 1982) on the importance of self-discovery in the learning process, I asked students to write about their own learning. Those in my four ninth grade World Civilizations classes responded to a questionnaire which asked them to evaluate what and how they had learned from a Great Religions unit. I taped discussions in which we talked about the observations they made about their learning process.

I saw value in these activities for the students and for the research. As I continued to use this strategy in the classroom, my students revealed to themselves and to me some interesting things about what happens when they write and when they learn. I collected so much data from them, however, that the task of analyzing and writing about all of it seemed overwhelming, especially since I was still spending a lot of time writing comments about their writing! Finally, I decided to write about what I discovered from one set of data from one of my five classes.

> Writing this paper helped me understand the book better and helped me to get my own point of view clear in my head.

This was tenth grader Ann's written comment about writing her essay on The Grapes of Wrath. Her class of twenty-five students had read, discussed, and written about Steinbeck's novel over the course of several weeks. The culminating assignment was an essay. Students handed in with their "final" product all other working drafts, from exploratory to last, as well as a student evaluation sheet completed by a classmate and a "writing questionnaire". The questionnaire asked them to describe their own process of revision and to evaluate what they believed they had accomplished in the writing of the essay, considering the process as well as the end product.

Ann's comment was typical. Many of her classmates wrote about new

insight they gained on the particular aspect of the novel they had chosen to write about.

Ray made a distinction between what he thought about and understood when he read the novel and what he understood when he wrote about it:

> I think that I realized and understood Ma's character more after writing my essay than I did when I read the book. I saw more clearly how Ma changed to lead the family after writing my composition.

Michele tried to articulate some of the feelings she had as she went through what she viewed as an arduous, sometimes frustrating, process which nevertheless led to something:

> I began writing down my basic ideas without any form. Then I tried to organize it a little, while trying not to look too much on the mechanical errors... We got into groups and I was given lots of advice [from students] about what changes I should make. I tried so hard to get it all together but it just wouldn't fall into place. We got more suggestions and I was able to work with it more. Things were starting to take shape. ... I didn't know how I'd make the deadline but I was very pleased and surprised with my final draft.

It was this process which provided for Michele a vehicle for learning:

> While doing this I really learned a lot more about the book and understood it better. Writing this helped me really look in and feel part of the book[and]also gave me pointers on how to write an essay.

Michele had struggled with reading the novel and with writing her essay, and her comments made me suspect that writing about the novel was what made her feel the reading of it had been personally worthwhile.

For other students as well, understanding of their subject seemed to improve as they began to control their own thoughts through the writing.

Suzanne and Amy seemed to recognize that it was in the actual process of writing that understanding came. Suzanne explained:

> As I wrote the timed writing my ideas formed. Yes, I think I understood Steinbeck's ideas for comparison and I found my own.

Amy described her experience:

> Before I wrote my paper I had a faint idea on two qualities which Steinbeck had heavily stressed throughout the novel. As I revised (which I did a lot of) I became more aware of what Steinbeck was really trying to say.

Pam was dissatisfied, finally, with the quality of her end product but stated:

> I did learn a lot about the reasons the author wrote the intercalary chapters. I also learned more about his purpose of writing the book in general.

For Pam and others, the process led to something worthwhile: understanding of someone else's ideas, a good feeling about a final product, clarification of one's own point of view, or new writing skills. The process for them became as important as the product, it seemed.

Kathy's comment shows that for her the process did not necessarily end with the teacher's grade on a "final" draft.

> I finally wrote the last draft and now re-reading it, I don't like it anymore and want to rewrite it.

Not every student saw value in the process. John stated:

> I don't really think that I accomplished that much because I was doing it only for a grade; however, I do feel that I did what was expected of me and to the best of my ability. I think I should get a B+.

Not only the process but his own product was of less importance than the grade. In his view, it seemed, accomplishing something worthwhile and receiving a grade were simply not connected.

When I asked students to write comments in the margins of their final drafts (at least one comment per paragraph), focusing on what they felt they had done effectively and what they still felt dissatisfied with, Marty complained, "It's a waste of time. I don't want to read it again. I didn't find anything wrong with it before, so why would I find anything wrong with it now?" Then, when I handed out and explained the Writing Questionnaire, she added, "We stay too long on the same subject; this is the same thing." Marty completed her Writing Questionnaire in the same manner she appeared to participate in the rest of the process: quickly and with little enthusiasm or effort.

Later, I examined what she had handed in: the student evaluation sheet completed by a partner was missing as were written comments of students in her revision group. There was scant evidence of actual revision in her writing. She described her revision process this way: "I just thought about what I was writing and wrote it", making changes in the following order: "from the beginning to make it sound right to the end, while changing the spelling or switching a few words around." While other students had filled close to a page in response to the last item of the questionnaire, Marty's complete evaluation of what she believed she had accomplished read: "I tried and learned to read over my writings before turning them in." I could well imagine what she meant by her response to the question, What part of the writing process do you enjoy the most? when she wrote: "Writing the end of it."

No wonder! For Marty, as for John, it appeared, the goal was to get it over with. They both seemed to be going through what they felt were meaning-

less motions for someone or something other than themselves in order to arrive at a necessary grade. It occurred to me that revising a piece of writing over and over conflicted with this goal on two counts. First, it prolonged getting it done; second, it implied there was something to be learned in the process that was not easily measured or neatly tabulated and recorded by the scorekeeper, and there was the unmistakable insinuation that the writer was in some way responsible for his own process.

According to the questionnaire (and subsequent class discussions), the difference in comments and apparent attitudes between Marty and John on the one hand and Ann, Michele, Kathy and classmates on the other was striking. The latter seemed to recognize, perhaps for the first time, that each possessed his own writing/revision process. They were making discoveries about their own processes, abilities, and accomplishments by writing about them -- discoveries they might not have made had they not been asked to think about the process they had used by writing about it.

Marty and John, on the other hand, were expressing a lack of sense of accomplishment, a lack of interest or faith in the process. There was not discovery but resignation alongside a plea for that acceptable grade.

I wondered why this difference existed, but mostly I felt frustrated because nothing I had done as a teacher had changed Marty's or John's views of writing or of themselves as writers. Until I could crack the tough shell of their attitudes, I felt, I would be stymied in any efforts to help them improve their writing - and that I saw as my responsibility.

In an effort to make sense of their comments and my observations, I tried to diagram the characteristics of either group. Ann, Suzanne, Michele, Kathy, students who wrote about what they had learned with apparent interest and seriousness, demonstrated an awareness of and an interest in how they learn as well as what they learn. They were more process-oriented; the product

was not all-important, but they took pride in it (Susan: "I'm proud of this paper"). These were the students who were interested in evaluating their own progress and appeared motivated to learn for themselves: they seemed to care about learning.

Marty and John did not appear to care about their own learning; they were writing for a grade, for someone or something other than themselves. They seemed product- rather than process-oriented but without a sense of pride in the product. It was the grade, not the accomplishment, that mattered. Both students seemed satisfied with exerting a minimum of effort to get an acceptable grade. Neither displayed any interest in evaluating their own progress; that was viewed as the teacher's job. In fact, Marty and John seemed to view learning as something the teacher, not they, was in charge of and responsible for. Why would either want to write about a process of no interest or concern to himself?

In spite of my sense that I now understood more clearly why these students had responded so differently to the questionnaire as well as to writing in general, I had to face the fact that my analysis of their attitudes and behavior was only a hypothesis. And how was that "hunch" going to have any concrete effect on my teaching or on Marty's and John's attitudes or performance? I still had to deal with them as well as strains of the same affliction in most of my students from time to time; few of them, after all, consistently exhibited full responsibility for their learning or faith in their ability to become good writers.

I had discovered no magic cure, but I began to see what had happened when students write willingly (or even in protest) about their writing process, and, as a result, I saw for the first time something practical I could do about my frustration in the face of Marty's and John's attitudes.

Writing about Steinbeck's novel helped Ann get her own point of view about his work clear in her head, but it was writing about her own writing which allowed her to see that that had happened. As the process of writing about The Grapes of Wrath served to extend her learning about the novel, so the process of writing about the writing extended her learning about her writing process. In addition, writing about learning, I saw, had opened up a dialogue between my students and themselves and between my students and me that might be very important. That dialogue might never have occurred if the students had never articulated what was going on. If student and teacher remain focused only on the grade or the end product of the process, I reasoned, neither will learn much from or about the process itself.

The written observations of all the students had served to clarify for me, as well as for them, feelings, attitudes, and perceptions of themselves and their work which affect their writing and learning processes. And Marty's and John's perceptions of their own processes were every bit as important for them and me to know about as were those of Ann, Michele, Kathy and the others.

At the very least, with Marty and John, this activity had put me, if not yet them, in touch with the fact that neither seemed interested in learning for himself. It had opened up the possibility for both of us to gain some insight into why this attitude existed, and with it, the potential to change. For all of the students it was important to see how they had done what they had done in order to consider whether there might be alternative approaches for the future (i.e., awareness precedes change). Wasn't it possible that if Marty and John continued to write about their learning, their increasing awareness of how they learn might generate interest in their own learning process and, in turn, a sense of that process as something they could control, something which mattered to them and for which they were

responsible? At last I felt I had some practical measure for dealing with a problem that had always been too abstract and overwhelming to deal with.

Then it hit me. Not only Marty and John seemed to feel that the teacher was responsible for evaluation of student performance and ultimately performance as well; I had been assuming that responsibility myself; hence the guilt not only about poor performance but about poor attitude as well. I thought of all the ways I had for years subtly and not subtly reinforced students' notions that I, not they, was responsible for their success or failure, for their positive or negative attitudes toward writing and learning. The copious comments I had written on students' drafts and final products seemed to signify to some of them that I cared about what they wrote and whether or not their writing improved, but had it not also stamped my imprint heavily on what they had to say? Likewise the grade - which most often came completely from the teacher, not from the student?

This time I had handled the grading and commenting somewhat differently. In asking them to assess their own process and product, I had attempted to shift the responsibility for assessment partly to them. Also, by telling me what they felt they had accomplished, they were making me a more educated and informed evaluator of their work. As I responded on the questionnaire to their own evaluations, I felt much less discouraged while evaluating their writing because I was not focusing only on their final products; I was encouraged by what they told me they were learning in the process.

When my ninth grade students responded to the same Writing Questionnaire after completing their essays on characters from Romeo and Juliet, their self-evaluations most frequently called attention to learning something about one or more of the following: the character who was the subject of the writing, Shakespeare's play, use of constructive criticism, revision, and writing an essay (many specifically cited organization of ideas, creating

a thesis and supporting it, writing a conclusion, incorporating quotes). In class discussions about their responses, most students indicated that they had learned something new about their own writing/revision process as well.

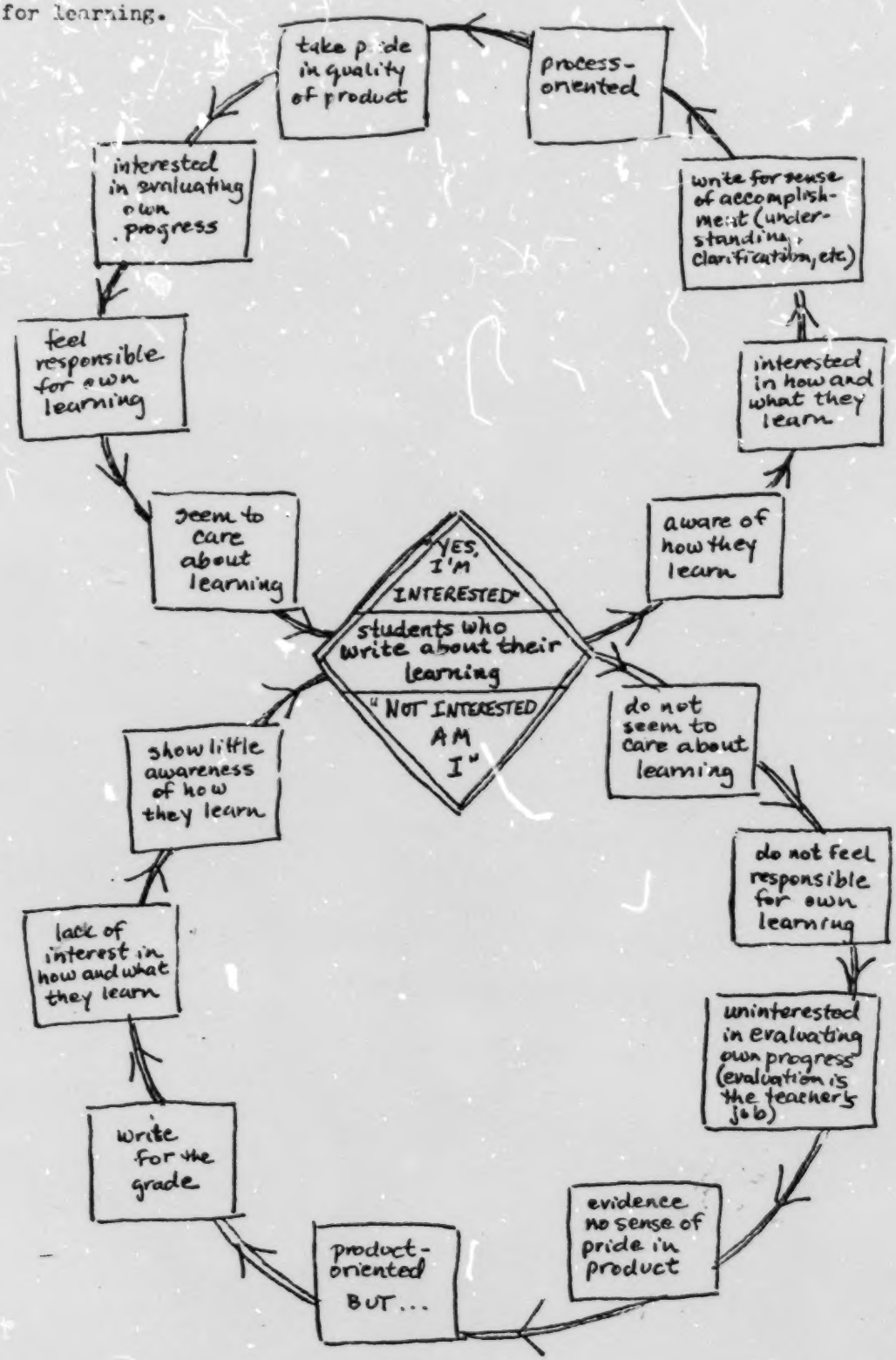
Recently I asked my tenth grade students to respond to a questionnaire after completing a written assignment based on a career search. The last item asked: "What do think of 'writing about learning' as you have done on this and other assignments once you have completed them?" Two students suggested that they would prefer a less structured format without teacher-directed guidelines for writing about learning. John and Marty wrote the following:

> John: I think that this helps me realize what I have accomplished.
>
> Marty: I think it's very helpful. It's better to write what you learn so you won't forget it. Also, as you are writing, you're learning about what you're writing.

I feel that many of my current students are accomplishing something probably few of my past students ever did: they are learning to analyze and assess their own growth, and they are acquiring an awareness of their own learning and writing processes which may make further growth possible.

As a teacher/researcher, I have come to see my role as a teacher differently. While my students made discoveries about themselves as learners by writing about learning, I made discoveries about myself as a teacher by writing about them. I learned how important it is that the process of learning be one of discovery for us all. I learned that I can't do it all. I am still spending a lot of time writing comments on rough and final drafts, even though the final comments focus on process as well as evaluate product. Making writing about learning a regular part of learning,

however, seems to be heading both my students and myself in a more productive direction - toward a classroom where we all share responsibility for learning.


take pride in quality of product
process-oriented
interested in evaluating own progress
write for sense of accomplishment (understanding, clarification, etc.)
feel responsible for own learning
interested in how and what they learn
seem to care about learning
aware of how they learn
"YES, I'M INTERESTED"
students who write about their learning
"NOT INTERESTED AM I"
show little awareness of how they learn
do not seem to care about learning
lack of interest in how and what they learn
do not feel responsible for own learning
write for the grade
uninterested in evaluating own progress (evaluation is the teacher's job)
product-oriented BUT...
evidence no sense of pride in product